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The Zen of Mud

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

I make ceramic vessels with a focus on craftsmanship, form, and simplicity. I am most at peace when I am creating art in the studio taking advantage of my energetic nature. I find inner balance through the production process. Creating is my meditation.

The Zen of Mud

Introduction

After graduating from high school I enrolled at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). While at NOVA I focused on improving as an artist and creating a portfolio of work. Soon there after, I applied to The Art Foundations Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and was accepted. At VCU I double majored in Crafts and Art Education and minored in African American studies. After graduation I began teaching art in Arlington County, Virginia. I currently teach ceramics and crafts at Yorktown High School.

After my first year teaching I wanted to continue improving as an art teacher and artist. The next logical step was to pursue a master's from VCU. I applied and was accepted into the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) program.

My Aesthetics

I make ceramic vessels, and primarily work with clay. I use natural materials because they are from the earth. My creative process is a vehicle for centering myself. It helps me to relax. While creating, my goal is to relax my mind and reach a deep meditative state. I work with clay to become one with the earth.

All my work is functional and dinnerware safe. My work has the capability of being used regularly. Although each piece can be used functionally, my intent was never for the vessels to be only used as utilitarian objects. I see my vessels as dramatic

pieces of art.

My work is about introspection. I wanted viewers to be able to look inside my vessels and see their reflection. Possibly the viewer will think about themselves, their lives, their souls, or their existences. The concept of implying that the soul is inside the vessel, as mirrored in self, is stressed by the reflective surface. To achieve this feature I have applied dark reflective glazes to the exteriors. The matte or slightly reflective glazes on the outside of each vessel contrasts and complements the reflective glaze inside. Contrast is a key element of my work. My dark color scheme favors a modern metallic look with colors like pewter, old pewter, and gunmetal. The glaze called Black Ice is the most reflective glaze I have come across as a ceramic artist and it has struck a chord with me. Upon seeing this dark reflection the viewer can't avoid seeing their own image. By seeing their image inside the vessel I am implying that the soul is contained inside. The reflective glazes create a literal mirror.

Influences

My biggest influences have been Japanese Wabi-sabi aesthetics, Sculptor Martin Puryear (1941-), and colleague Jeffery Pabotoy (1978-). My attraction to these aesthetics and artists is due to their ability to blend contemporary ideas into their work while maintaining a connection to the natural world.

The Japanese aesthetic influence is known as Wabi-sabi, which is defined as the imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete.

For example, this means that plants in the budding stage or in the process of decay are more evocative of beauty because they suggest the transience of life.

The Japanese influence on my ceramic art is found in my use of earthenware clay, which is commonly used in contemporary Japan. The Japanese aesthetic influence on my work is evident in the vessel *Imperfect* (Appendix, 1). When *Imperfect* was created I was very new to ceramics so *Imperfect* is indeed imperfect. During production *Imperfect* became too dry and developed a large crack completely around the top of the piece. Being beyond repair I simply embraced the concept of Wabi-sabi and titled it *Imperfect*.

I had a similar Wabi-sabi experience with my vessel *Crawling* (Appendix, 2). During production of *Crawling* I was very focused on form and craftsmanship and was pleased with the results. I was also experimenting with different glaze applications by layering one glaze over another. However, during the firing process an issue with the glaze arose known as crawling. Crawling occurs when glazes do not completely settle on the surface of the clay body during firing. Although initially very disappointed with the results, in time I felt the Wabi-sabi aspect of *Crawling* and now consider it one my most successful pieces.

Martin Puryear's work has had a major impact on me artistically. He is a contemporary sculptor with unparalleled craftsmanship. Although impressively simple in design, Puryear's work is the product of much thought. The work evokes deep feelings in the viewer while also communicating meaningful messages. Puryear's artistic influence enabled me to be confident

creating simplified ceramic vessels without fear of being too minimal.

For the last few years I've had the opportunity to work alongside Jeffery Pabotoy. Also an art teacher, Jeff heads the ceramics program at Yorktown High School. Jeff taught me his process for hand building which directly influenced my artistic development. Jeff routinely described to me techniques on how to differentiate my work from other artists. Like hand building round vessel forms with hard lines, which could not be made using the wheel, as well as his approach to displaying work in alternative artistic venues like real estate open houses. Jeff's guidance improved my approach to designing ceramic forms that appealed to audiences and would also sell.

Processes

I use hand-building techniques to create my work. A vessel starts from a slab of clay being rolled out on the slab roller. I leave the slab of clay uncovered allowing it to stiffen up and become easier to manipulate. Using a circle template as a guide I use a utility knife to cut a circle of clay from the stiff slab, now the piece is moved to the banding wheel, which is a type of hand operated turn-table. I pay close attention making sure my circular slab stays centered on the banding wheel. Then, I score and slip the outer edge of my clay slab. Scoring is scratching into the clay's surface. The score lines are channels for the slip. After using a kitchen fork to scratch my score lines, I apply the slip as I rotate the banding wheel. Slip is watered

down clay and acts like glue and helps clay stick to itself. Potters use slip to fill score lines as an adhesive for more clay. After the slip is applied I rotate the banding wheel and add coils of clay to my base. I add each coil evenly so the walls of the piece remain consistent. Using the extruder, a machine used to create continuous lengths of coil, I add coils and the vessel becomes progressively taller.

I use the Japanese Shigaraki hand-building technique which dates back to the year 742 AD. I use this technique in my work because it is the most effective way for me to quickly create vessels. The technique involves adding coils in a sequence of four layers at a time. The technique is still used in Japan for building large pieces.

To insure my pieces come out correctly I use templates. A template helps maintain a form's integrity. The template is placed against the clay form as it rests on top of the banding wheel. When the banding wheel rotates, the template drags across the form removing excess clay while maintaining the piece's form. Templates are made of scraps of old matte board cut to the size of each vessel. They enable me to make forms that are virtually impossible to spontaneously throw on the pottery wheel.

Key Pieces

I seek to communicate emotion through my artwork. *Obsidian*, (Appendix, 3) was designed to embody qualities of strength, openness, and abstraction. *Obsidian* was originally conceptualized as a representation of a man with a narrow torso and a strong

upper body which historically is a standard for the male form. Making *Obsidian* vastly improved my technical skills since it was the most difficult form I had attempted to that point.

The piece *Black Ice* (Appendix, 4) bears the glaze of the same name. The form, size, and proportions of the piece are representative of my technical skill. *Black Ice* is my first piece with Black Ice glaze on the inside and outside of the vessel. This glazing of the inside and outside of *Black Ice* was intended to accentuate the mirror-like qualities of the glaze. It also draws attention to the viewer's reflection.

A personal style is now emerging in my work. I plan on continuing to develop my use of various glazes on a variety of vessels. I plan on increasing the size of my vessels. I will also make the transition to using stoneware clay and high fire glazes. I am also interested in incorporating more surface texture into my work.

Conclusion

I've worked in several mediums the last few years but my passion is ceramics. I use ceramic hand-building techniques to explore the vessel as a form. My approach is very basic, to work hard and push myself to the full extent of my abilities. The subject matter of my work centers on introspection, soul searching, and meditation. Primarily because I believe these aspects of life deserve more attention. For me to evolve the exploration of my consciousness is necessary. Through thoughts,

dreams, and emotions consciousness imparts artistic inspiration. I meditate in order to tune into my consciousness and develop my own opinion, or perspective. Without an opinion I lose motivation and become apathetic and procrastinate. The repetitive process of working with coil during the *Identity* series allowed me to reach deep meditative states. There I engaged and persisted in the creative process. My work improved while I developed a better understanding of myself as an artist and individual. The Japanese influence on my work is both ideological and aesthetic.

Earning the MIS-IAR degree was very beneficial to me. Giving me insight into how I work, my personal aesthetics, and who I am as an emerging artist. As a note taker I realized I do not think linearly, nor do I work linearly. My thoughts branch out in web-like patterns, this causes me to tend to get off task. So my artistic process involves considerable focus, will power, and self discipline. I develop my best ideas when I draw detailed sketches outlining concrete plans which break the project down into manageable parts which can be completed step-by-step. I perform best when I begin projects promptly and maintain a daily work routine. Due to my extremely extroverted nature I work best in solitude with time to contemplate my work. My best work happens when I focus on mastery of my techniques.

Aesthetically I favor precision and craftsmanship over

improvisation within an artwork. I appreciate large scale work that appears to be completed by professionals. I prefer work which fills up a space and is not only aesthetically pleasing but also conceptually fascinating.

As an emerging three-dimensional visual artist I specialize in making ceramic and glass vessels. Like the human body is a vessel for the soul, my work explores the vessel as a conduit for the soul. In the future I plan on working on larger scale pieces incorporating different clay bodies and high-fire glazes.

Having a master's degree will make me more marketable as a teacher and through the process of earning the diploma I grew as an artist. More than anything earning my MIS-IAR degree has been a springboard for me to transition from being an amateur artist and teacher to an emerging professional artist.

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Appendix

List of Figures

Figure 1. *Imperfect*, ceramic and glass, 14"x6"x6", 2010.

Figure 2. *Crawling*, ceramic and glass, 16"x6"x6", 2010.

Figure 3. *Obsidian*, ceramic and glass, 16"x8"x8", 2009.

Figure 4. *Black Ice*, ceramic and glass, 16"x6"x6", 2010.



Figure 1. *Imperfect*, ceramic and glass, 14"x6"x6", 2010.



Figure 2. *Crawling*, ceramic and glass, 16"x6"x6", 2010.



Figure 3. *Obsidian*, ceramic and glass, 16"x8"x8", 2009.



Figure 4. *Black Ice*, ceramic and glass, 16"x6"x6", 2010.

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Exhibitions:

2010 *Identity*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in
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